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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 009201

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [ECON](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: NEW PRIME MINISTER MAKING GOOD USE OF HIS
POLITICAL HONEYMOON

REF: A. AMMAN 9145

[1](#)B. AMMAN 8823

Classified By: CDA Daniel Rubinstein for Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY & COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) King Abdullah has publicly charged newly appointed PM Marouf Bakhit with implementing political reforms, combating terrorism, and reducing poverty and unemployment. A well-respected figure untainted by rumors of corruption, Bakhit has already met with leading politicians and pledged to maintain a balance between security and public freedoms. While he brings strong academic, diplomatic and security credentials to the job, his lack of political experience with parliament may leave him hard pressed to push through controversial reforms. At least in the short term, this may prove to be a significant hurdle given that earlier speculation about parliament's imminent dismissal has now been definitively quashed - parliament is to resume its session on December 1, and there are presently no plans to dissolve it. END SUMMARY & COMMENT.

MARCHING INSTRUCTIONS

[1](#)2. (U) In a public letter issued November 24 designating Marouf Bakhit as prime minister, King Abdullah charged the new head of government with vigorously pursuing political and economic reforms, while adopting a comprehensive strategy to fight terrorism. Rather than set back proposed reforms as some analysts had expected, the King claimed that the November 9 terrorist bombings of three Amman hotels "increased our determination to adhere to our reform and democratization process, which is irreversible." He specifically asked Bakhit to "quickly draft" new laws on elections, political parties, and municipalities that would "renew our parliamentary and political life, and ensure wider participation in the decision-making process." On the economic side, the letter highlighted the need for the new government to "immediately alleviate poverty and unemployment" by developing plans to create jobs, attract investment, and eliminate corruption.

[1](#)3. (U) King Abdullah further called on Bakhit to wage a "relentless war" on terrorism, and particularly against "the culture of takfir," (the revolutionary Salafists' tactic of branding other Muslim as unbelievers). Without offering specific proposals, the letter advocated the adoption of a broad anti-terrorism strategy that would "not only deal with the security dimension," but also address ideological, cultural and political factors that give rise to religious extremism.

A QUICK START

[1](#)4. (U) Within hours of his designation as prime minister, Bakhit met separately with the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Abdul Hadi Majali, and the President of Senate, Zeid Rifai. According to the press, Bakhit told both legislative leaders that his government would focus on implementing reforms, improving economic opportunities for Jordanians, and enhancing security. He further stated that his cabinet would carefully balance new security requirements with public freedoms. Bakhit met with members of the principal blocs in parliament on November 26 to outline his priorities and to discuss the formation of his cabinet, which was named on November 27 (ref A).

[1](#)5. (U) In his official reply to the King's letter of designation, Bakhit said his government would be "committed to placing reform as a top priority." He continued that the reforms recommended in the National Agenda (ref B), formally presented to and endorsed by the King on November 23, would "guide our way" in "enhancing democracy as a lifestyle, culture and practice." He expressed his determination to preserve national security and combat terrorism, adding that while his cabinet would "embrace dialogue" and listen to the opinions of others, "Jordan's higher interests will always remain a redline that no one will be allowed to cross."

REACTION

16. (C) Bakhit has been well received by columnists and editorial writers in the local media. Contacts whom we have talked to regarding Bakhit have likewise been positive in their comments. While a few MPs have grumbled that the new PM "should have been a politician," all agreed that he is a well-respected figure untainted by corruption allegations. Bakhit has been described to us as "mature," "balanced," "experienced," and "a solid choice," although a few contacts remarked that he is "not particularly imaginative."

COMMENT

17. (C) Bakhit brings impressive credentials to the job of prime minister. An East Banker and retired major general, he combines a strong security background with solid experience as both an academic (PhD holder and former university vice-president) and a diplomat (former ambassador to Turkey and Israel). What he lacks is experience as a politician and influence in parliament -- as did both of his immediate predecessors, former PMs Faisal al-Fayez and Adnan Badran. Bakhit's prompt meetings with MPs provided a good start in his relations with the legislature. But he will be hard pressed to push controversial reforms - particularly a new elections law - through a parliament dominated by traditionalist East Bank politicians who see themselves as losing out in any significant change of the political system. While the largely anti-reform parliament may have earlier been on the chopping block - and thereby less of a challenge to a new PM and his reformist ministers - the new cabinet brings to a close the current round of changes in the political lineup. Parliament is to resume its session December 1, and we understand there are presently no plans to dissolve it.
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